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ABSTRACT

This paper poses a series of questions to assist programs in deciding what it is about parent involvement that they wish to evaluate. The questions focus on the nature of parent involvement, why parent involvement is needed, and what evaluation of parent involvement should include. A conceptual framework for research on the impact of parent involvement is suggested, and a plea is made for researchers and practitioners to acquire greater conceptual relativity and to look beyond student achievement outcomes as the standard of parent involvement's success. (Author/CS)

Center for the Study of Parent Involvement

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Evaluating Parent Involvement

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Founding itself upon love, humility, and faith, dialogue becomes a horizontal relationship of which mutual trust between the dialoguers is the logical consequence.

Pedagogy of the Oppressed
--Paulo Freire

EVALUATING PARENT INVOLVEMENT[1]

Daniel Safran*

How do we evaluate the parent involvement component of educational programs? This question requires our understanding what parent involvement is and what it does. It also demands some agreement on the nature of evaluation.[2]

This paper proposes a series of questions to assist programs in deciding what it is about parent involvement they wish to evaluate. This is followed by a conceptual framework for research on the impact of parent involvement. The paper concludes with a plea for researchers and practitioners to acquire greater conceptual relativity and to look beyond student achievement outcomes as the standard of parent involvement's success.

Fortunately, there has been an increase in the amount of literature on parent involvement and community participation in programs for young children. Unfortunately, it is now even harder to keep up with programmatic and research activities. And, to make it more difficult, students of parent involvement are found in such diverse disciplines as adult education, political science, family medicine, environmental design, developmental psychology, educational administration, and community organization--to name a few. In many cases they don't speak the same language!

Parent involvement means different things to different people. To know what we are evaluating requires greater clarity. For each program purporting to

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have a parent involvement component these questions must be asked and answered:

A. Why involve parents?
B. In what ways are parents being involved?
C. What are parents doing and what is being done to them?
D. How has parent involvement come about and how is it being maintained or thwarted?
E. What impact is parent involvement having--and on whom?

In the following pages I will attempt to examine each question, review some basic assumptions, and suggest some implications for program activities which may enable greater clarity in determining what is to be evaluated.

A. Why involve parents?

This question is one of goals. The literature[3] suggests at least two general bases for parent involvement:

1. the conclusions of education and socialization research which suggests that it is "good for children"; this is confirmed by a persuasive supply of staff and parent folklore.

2. the demands for participation from parents and community constituencies who believe themselves to have been excluded and/or oppressed by the professional and bureaucratic establishment.

Hess[4] outlines four models which serve as bases for many educational programs for disadvantaged children. Since many of these programs have components for involving parents it is helpful to examine each of these models, their basic assumptions, and their programmatic implications. (See Figure I.) For example, a program based on the "Deficit" model may hope to serve children by educating their parents in home management, personal hygiene, and family planning. A program based on the "Social Structural" model may hope to serve children by involving their parents in problem solving, leadership training, and social agitation. In each case parent involvement exists, but its basis and manifestations are quite different.

Model	Assumption	Program Implications	
		Child	Parent
"Deficit"	The low income child has had fewer meaningful experiences than the middle class child and is thus disadvantaged in his readiness for public school.	Remediation in order to catch up with other children.	Parent education to fill in gaps in what parent knows about the world.
"School-as-Failure"	The school is unable to draw upon or deal with the child's own resources.	Teachers need to be retrained for greater sensitivity to and knowledge of the child's resources and needs; school-community relations to be improved.	Involvement so as to produce school reform; engage in problem solving and decision making experiences.
"Cultural Difference"	Although not deficient, the child differs from the middle class child and the middle class values of the public school.	Develop and implement a curriculum based upon cultural pluralism.	Involve parents as representatives of child's culture and as community resources.
"Social Structural"	Parents behave in accordance with societal demands and expectations, and the way in which they've been treated; you cannot change the individual without changing the social structure in which he lives.	No immediate program implications; child is the ultimate beneficiary of social changes.	Involve parents in and train them for social action to identify and overcome oppressive social conditions.

FIGURE I: FOUR PROGRAM MODELS

Irrespective of any predetermined program model, parents exert their own pressure for involvement. This pressure may come in ways not anticipated by program developers or administrators. For example:

An article about school bus safety appears in a popular family magazine. Several parents get into a discussion at the laundromat. One parent tells about how her daughter got a chipped tooth. After some talk about whose fault it was, there's a consensus that something should be done. Three months later a school safety committee is meeting with the superintendent about bus safety and a subcommittee is concerning itself with the nutritional value of certain school snacks.

Another example of "unintended" parent involvement is the case of school consolidation.

A city school system plans to alter the pattern of schools from elementary, junior, and senior high, to lower, middle, and upper schools. In several neighborhoods "economy" will mean losing their school site and having to send their children longer distances to other schools. Fear of losing the school site arouses parental concerns about school activities and worries older families about the potential loss of property values. Residents begin to use the school for community meetings. Interaction with the staff results in an increase in school volunteers. Since the staff want to stay together rather than disperse all over the district they find a common issue in talking with parents. Before long, parents are involved to a degree unique in the district and outsiders are recognizing the vitality of the school and urging its retention as a "demonstration" school.

In most cases, persons attached to a program may have a notion of why parents are being involved which differs from the models and concepts of educators and planners. Our knowing why parents are involved will require a strong respect for situational variables.[5]

B. In what ways are parents being involved?

This is a question of roles. The three most common roles played by parents in educational programs are: 1) "recipient" of parent education/educator of one's own child; 2) school volunteer/paid employee; 3) advisor/decision maker.[6] Each of these roles can be delineated further. For example. David Hoffman[7] outlines five levels of decision making: complete parent control; sharing of responsibility; serving on an advisory committee; having opportunities to observe decision making and express concerns; being kept informed.

In many programs these three major roles may be played concurrently--or on an alternating basis--and thus may be hard to isolate for study. Even in programs where there are strict boundaries to the ways in which parents are involved, one cannot preclude the existence of numerous informal parent-child, parent-staff, parent-board interactions.

C. What are parents doing and what is being done to them?

In every kind of involvement, parents "get an education." It may or may not be the kind of parent education intended by the program planners. Involved parents usually find themselves learning something about self-awareness, child development, health and nutrition, curriculum development, family planning, group dynamics, instructional methodology, policy planning, program management, institutional reform, how not to conduct a meeting, etc.

When parents are involved as volunteers or paid employees their activities may include just about anything program staff may do. A key question, however, is what are parents really doing? There is a great difference between (1) parent-staff consigned to a sub-professional caste system in which job security is dependent upon capricious funding sources and (2) parents whose role is respected and supported by inservice training and opportunities for career development.

Contrasts are even greater among those programs which say that parents are involved in decision making. Parents who are involved "because of the guidelines" may have a wholly different feeling about their participation than parents who are welcomed as partners by staff who believe that parent involvement is vital. Parents who serve as decision makers in one program may be passively accepting some externally imposed cluster of activities unrelated to community needs; in another program, parent decision makers may be exercising functional control over all program affairs.[8]

D. How has parent involvement come about and how is it being maintained or thwarted?

What factors, in addition to the assumptions described above, have brought about, maintained, or thwarted parent involvement? Parent involvement in an

educational program may be due to legislative or administrative mandate and may have a different character from involvement resulting from an energetic administrator committed to community development. Parent involvement may be influenced by the training provided teachers in working with parents or whether a special staff position exists such as Parent Coordinator.

Standards for parent involvement are rare.[9] Each program is unique in its history, in the attributes of its staff, and in innumerable other ways. Why parents become involved, how they are involved, and with what impact demands an understanding of a program's life and times. I have seen an early childhood program achieve extensive parent involvement and far surpass its envious neighbors because (or so it appeared) an Education Coordinator created a situation where Head Teachers were competing with each other for the best attendance record at parent meetings. In another setting, at the first parent meeting of a community oriented alternative school, I observed a teacher giving double signals by saying: "We want parents to become involved. This is your job; you have to do it all by yourself. I'm not going to interfere; this is your thing. I'm going to be too busy working with the children!" Future parent meetings were "strangely" lacking in attendance and the staff explained that "poor people don't really want to get involved." As a parent, I have had the experience of my child's bringing home a 32 page proposal from a school staff with the following note attached: "Please come to an urgent meeting tonight to approve sending this proposal to Washington for our refunding...." (Four confused parents showed up eager to give whatever help they could in this emergency; we were told that it was really too late to change anything --the notice of the meeting was necessary to show that the program had "parent involvement.")

In any number of programs, parents become involved because of the promise of jobs, or to get away from the kids, or just "to check out what's happening." Another concept of why parents participate in schools, suggests that "the protection of youth and the maintenance of discipline require parent surveillance, even when youth are temporarily placed in the custody of other adults. Thus in our society adults must journey to school to discharge their parental obligations."[10]

The variety of circumstances resulting in what is called "parent involvement" demands a case by case approach to its study and evaluation.

E. What impact is parent involvement having--and on whom?

For many, this is the pay-off question. And the major pay-off focus has been on child achievement. There has been only moderate interest in parent involvement's impact on the family, on the educational program and staff, or on the community and its institutions.

The best work to date in conceptualizing the impacts of parent involvement has been by Mimi Stearns.[11] Stearns takes three parent roles (tutor, paid staff, and decision maker) and attempts to hypothesize the chains of events leading from involvement to its supposed impact on student achievement. The chains are based upon the "rhetoric" and assertions found in Federal guidelines, program descriptions, and various position papers advocating parent involvement and the broadening of citizen participation. A number of the links in each chain are supported by research evidence;[12] yet there are frequent gaps identified where additional research is required.

Stearns introduces her "chains" with the following comments:

> Describing the chains of events helps to clarify several fundamental issues and permits examination of specific linkages between parent involvement and child performance in school. Since the evidence currently available from the literature is equivocal, knowledge about specific links in the chain will have to be developed; such knowledge is probably the only way to explain why a given program of parent involvement may be successful while another program, which at least superficially resembles the first, has very different impacts. In addition, these descriptions permit us to look for evidence from additional sources such as the psychological literature of child development and small group theory. These chains, of course, do not take into account all the possibilities, and . . . extensive research is still needed to confirm or challenge these sets of hypotheses.[13]

The first group of chains concerns the impact of parents as tutors. Stearns proposes three channels through which this kind of involvement may have its effect:

1. Increasing the motivation of the child
2. Increasing the child's skills
3. Improving the parent's self image

These hypothetical links to improved student achievement are shown in Figure II.[14]

The second group of chains suggests the set of events resulting from parent involvement as paid employees. The effects may be hypothesized in five ways:

1. Increasing the community's understanding of the school (legitimacy)
2. Adapting the school's program to the community
3. Improving the parent's self image (direct; e.g., higher self esteem and greater regard for children)
4. Improving the parent's self image (indirect; e.g., achieving greater social/peer group recognition)
5. Changing the home environment

Stearns' analysis of these links to improved student achievement are shown in Figure III.[15]

The third set of chains linking parent involvement in decision making to student achievement include three routes:

1. Increasing the community's understanding of the school (legitimacy)
2. Adapting the school's program to the community
3. Increasing parental sense of control over their own lives ("parent fate control")

These hypothetical sets of events are shown in Figure IV.[16]

Stearns' models should provide researchers and practitioners with a framework from which parent involvement programming can be better observed and discussed. We should at least be encouraged to specify our presumptions about parent involvement and have greater facility in asking--and answering--the question, "What are we evaluating?"

These models allow us to engage in a more thorough conceptual analysis of why to involve parents. I would like to suggest that there are other pay-offs to parent involvement than student "achievement." While attempts at measurement would be difficult, indeed, parent involvement in educational programs for children could have the following goals:

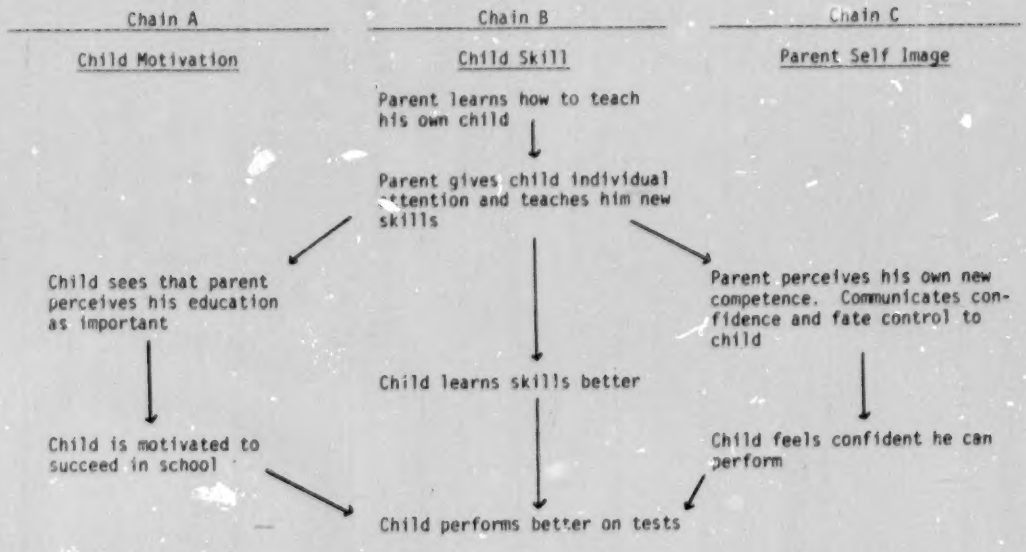
Chain A
Child Motivation
Chain B
Child Skill
Chain C
Parent Self Image
Parent learns how to teach his own child
Parent gives child individual attention and teaches him new skills
Child sees that parent perceives his education as important
Parent perceives his own new competence. Communicates confidence and fate control to child
Child learns skills better
Child is motivated to succeed in school
Child feels confident he can perform
Child performs better on tests

FIGURE II: PARENTS AS LEARNERS AND AS TUTORS OF THEIR OWN CHILDREN

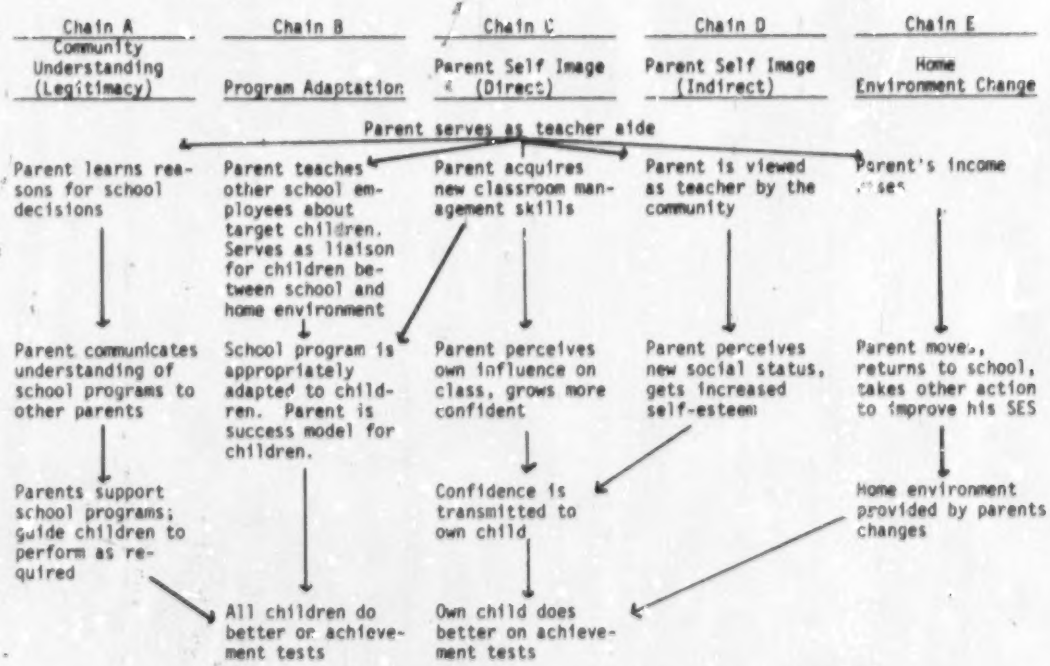
Chain A
Community Understanding (Legitimacy)
Chain B
Program Adaptation
Chain C
Parent Self Image (Direct)
Chain D
Parent Self Image (Indirect)
Chain E
Home Environment Change
Parent serves as teacher aide
Parent learns reasons for school decisions
Parent teaches other school employees about target children. Serves as liaison for children between school and home environment
Parent acquires new classroom management skills
Parent is viewed as teacher by the community
Parent's income rises
Parent communicates understanding of school programs to other parents
School program is appropriately adapted to children. Parent is success model for children.
Parent perceives own influence on class, grows more confident
Parent perceives new social status, gets increased self-esteem
Parent moves, returns to school, takes other action to improve his SES
Parents support school programs; guide children to perform as required
Confidence is transmitted to own child
Home environment provided by parents changes
All children do better on achievement tests
Own child does better on achievement tests

FIGURE III: PARENTS AS PARAPROFESSIONAL EMPLOYEES IN THE SCHOOL PROGRAM

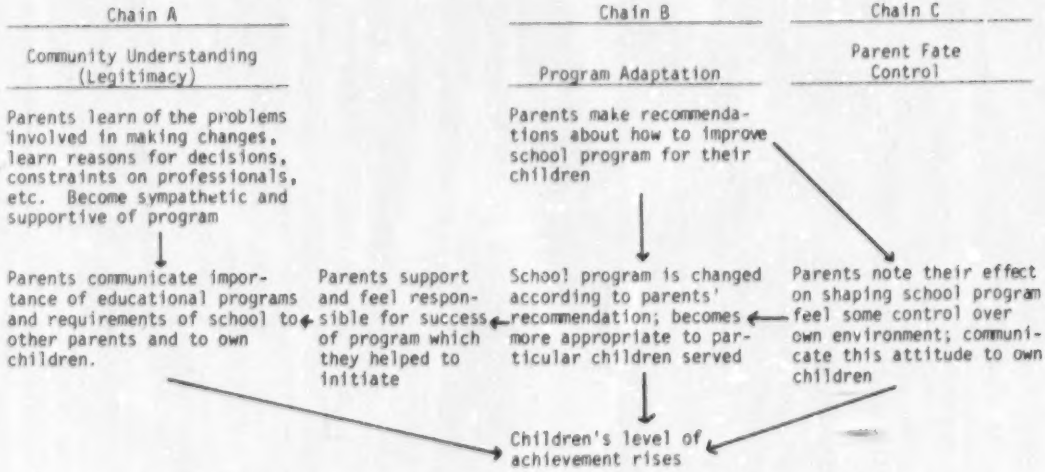
Chain A
Community Understanding (Legitimacy)
Parents learn of the problems involved in making changes, learn reasons for decisions, constraints on professionals, etc. Become sympathetic and supportive of program
Parents communicate importance of educational programs and requirements of school to other parents and to own children.
Parents support and feel responsible for success of program which they helped to initiate
Chain B
Program Adaptation
Parents make recommendations about how to improve school program for their children
School program is changed according to parents' recommendation; becomes more appropriate to particular children served
Chain C
Parent Fate Control
Parents note their effect on shaping school program feel some control over own environment; communicate this attitude to own children
Children's level of achievement rises

FIGURE IV: PARENTS AS DECISION MAKERS

1. Creating beautiful things for community enjoyment.

2. Building more fully integrated families which allow for individual growth and greater appreciation of shared experiences.

3. Strengthening the capabilities of children and adults for identifying and resolving oppressive social conditions.

4. Developing greater sensitivity among persons who serve on boards of directors or as elected officials.

5. Rehumanizing persons engaged in professional or bureaucratic work.

6. Encouraging the growth of children and adults in attaining new levels of consciousness.

I believe that these goals are approachable through parent involvement in educational programs and that hypothetical links may be proposed to suggest chains of events leading to their achievement. Postulating such links would be a difficult job, not so much because of scanty research and empirical data, but because of a problem we have in conceptualization. As academicians and practitioners I think that we have become wedded to an institutional perspective of parent involvement. We suffer from a form of institutional centrism. Before we could conceive of "parent involvement" we must have had a conception of "parent uninvolvement." There is a fable about that.

A FABLE

Once upon a time, long, long ago, before the institutionalization of education and child care, there was no such thing as Parent Involvement. That was becuase there was no such thing as Parent Uninvolvement. One day a magician arrived. He went from place to place showing the people the wonders of schools and child care centers, how they could bring children together, out of the rain, off the streets, and out from under parental feet.

The people liked the things the magician showed them. They began to build schools and to convert old houses into child care centers; they elected school boards; they hired teachers; they created

indestructible playthings. Pretty soon, the schools and child care centers began to work all by themselves--as magician's devices are wont to do sometimes. At first the people were very happy. But then a monster called Parent Uninvolvement appeared at these schools and child care centers. This monster was very evil! The more a school or child care center was able to work all by itself, the stronger was the monster's attack. The monster took over the minds of principals, directors, teachers, parents, and even children. In fact, children were its favorite target because the monster knew that, one day, they would grow up to be principals, directors, teachers, and parents. And the more children it attacked, the stronger the monster became.

Only one thing frightened the monster: it was a friendly spirit called Parent Involvement. Parent Involvement came in mysterious and not so mysterious ways. But wherever and whenever the friendly spirit came, a terrific battle would take place with the monster. Parent Uninvolvement had made slaves out of many principals, directors, teachers, and parents and they fought to defend the monster. Parent Involvement could not enslave anyone nor point to any sure and safe path. Yet, somehow, the friendly spirit awakened hope in the people. It sang of happier, freer children, of more competent, responsible parents; it spoke of gratified, productive teachers, of more secure and less harried administrators. But the friendly spirit cautioned one and all with its profound message: "Parent Involvement isn't easy but it beats Hell out of the unaccountable, detached, mechanical, arrogant mess we've got now; get it together and prepare for some hard work!"

Throughout the land, people--not too many, but enough--harkened to the challenge. And while some schools and child care centers succeeded, at least for the time being, in ridding themselves of the monster, many others struggled to no avail. In the midst of their struggles they would cry out, "Argghh, you've got to be kidding! We can't do it; the monster is too strong."

At these times the friendly spirit would say: "Well, try it another way," or "There's always Plan B...," or "Maybe if you gave out Green Stamps...."

When parent involvement is contemplated, we tend to conceive of it in terms of getting the folks "in"--into the school or child care center, in as volunteers, in as staff, in as concerned, vital citizens. The school, the day care center, the educator, the psychologist stand at stage center and court parents in the wings. Parents are seen as being on the periphery. Or, to use another metaphor, the microscope is focussed not on the child's world, but on that segment illuminated by the light of clinical or academic observation.

We have created and accepted spatial categories for children's lives and we act as though these categories were real and separate worlds!

It is true that some of these spaces--home, school, street, playground--"exist" and may be studied as distinct entities. But do they constitute such thoroughly unconnected territories as our research sometimes suggests? Perhaps it is difficult to conceive otherwise because of the general public acceptance of these spatial categories--or the problem may be our great distance from our own existence as children. We observe educational programs as researchers and practitioners rather than as parents or children. Perhaps that is why we conceive of "parent involvement" in a way which tells us that parents are out and our job is to get them in.

The issue is not for us to determine whether a segmental or a gestalt perception is more correct, but to be conscious of the implications of accepting one or the other. Our vision is blurred and our perspective skewed by the way in which we define the universe around us. Yet, to the extent that we are aware of the relativity of this universe, our ability to understand it will be strengthened and our research and practice will follow suit.

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Our society is composed of large, impersonal institutions. Their power over our lives is not to be minimized by any philosophical digression on conceptual or perceptual relativity. Parent Uninvolvement is only one of the monsters threatening our well being and educational programs would do well to maintain and strengthen their efforts to involve parents. Yet, I believe that these efforts must be directed toward broader goals than child achievement test scores. Parents and educational programs for their children must be involved with each other. For it is with each other that parents and educators can address the crucial issues of both child development and community development.

NOTES

[1]I owe a debt to the comprehensive works of Robert Hess and Mimi Stearns. Each author had provided both detailed and summarized reports on studies of parent involvement; see notes below for references.

[2]For a biased analysis of the nature of evaluation in social action programs and a plea for an interventionist approach, see the author's paper "Evaluating Parent Involvement: Some Reflections," prepared for the NAEYC National Conference, Seattle, November 1973.

[3]Robert D. Hess, et al, "Parent Involvement in Early Education," in E. H. Groteberg, (ed.), Day Care: Resources for Decisions (Washington, D.C.: OEO, 1971).

[4]Ibid., pp. 274-6.

[5]See Ira Gordon, "Developing Parent Power," in E. H. Groteberg, (ed.), Critical Issues in Research Related to Disadvantaged Children, (Princeton, N.J.: Educational Testing Service, 1969).

[6]Miriam Stearns, et al, Parent Involvement in Compensatory Education Programs, (Menlo Park, Ca.: Stanford Research Institute, August, 1973) uses a role delineation similar to this one.

[7]David B. Hoffman, Parent Participation in Preschool Day Care, Monograph #5, (Atlanta: SE Educational Labs, 1971).

[8]Stearns quotes a typology of parent involvement in decision making, prepared by the Recruitment Leadership and Training Institute (Philadelphia). A similar list, graded according to the extent of citizen involvement, was prepared by Sherry Arnstein: "A Ladder of Citizen Participation," American Institute of Planners Journal, vol. 25, July, 1969.

[9]The Head Start program of the Office of Child Development Department of Health, Education and Welfare has performance standards in the area of parent involvement; they are occasionally vague, but offer something for comparisons. (OCD Policy Notice N-30-364-1, January 1973).

[10]John Michael, Conceptions of Childhood and Parent Participation in Schools, paper presented to the American Sociological Association Meeting, Denver, August, 1971.

[11]See Stearns, op.cit., particularly Chapter IV, "The Impacts of Parent Involvement: Knowledge and Speculation," pp. 29-49.

[12]See both Groteberg anthologies, op.cit., particularly the contributions of Robert Hess.

[13]Stearns, op.cit., pp. 29-30.

[14]Ibid., p. 31.

[15]Ibid., p. 34.

[16]Ibid., p. 37.

Center for the Study of Parent Involvement

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The Center for the Study of Parent Involvement has been established to:

-Collect information on parent involvement including

  legislation
  research
  action methodology
  administrative innovations
  experimental programs
  teacher and parent education

-Identify and examine parent involvement activities and accomplishments which enhance the value of formal education

-Study such questions as

  What impact does parent involvement have on children, parents, teachers, administrators, institutions, and the community?

  What factors facilitate or impede parent involvement at the local school level?

  What approaches are effective in involving parents of handicapped/exceptional children?

  What specific competencies do teachers and administrators need for effective work with parents?

  What are the educational and political implications of parent involvement in the U.S. and developing nations?

-Prepare and disseminate materials and monographs which contribute to the work of practitioners in educational and community development

-Provide consultation and training to local education agencies, administrators, teachers, and parent/student/community organizations